

## Chapter 1

‘Now remember lad, it’s not forever. It’s four years, that’s all.’

Riding at his father’s side, Hephaistion said nothing, only nodded. Amyntor was talking largely to himself, in any case.

‘There’ll be furlough, and Pella’s not far. You’ll be home soon enough.’

Hephaistion nodded again. He had heard all of this before; Amyntor had said the same thing to his wife, Hephaistion’s mother, most days over the past few weeks. Just last night, Hephaistion, lying awake in his bed, caught in that place between excitement and dread, had listened to his parents talking in another room. The conversation had been familiar. His mother’s voice had been sharp with concern –

*‘Hasn’t he had enough from you without giving him our son too?’*

– and his father’s low and sure.

*‘It’s only four years, and he’s of an age for it. It would be worse to keep him back.’*

*‘Why? He’s the only son we have. Tell the king we need him here, you with one good arm and the herds to manage. Philippos would give dispensation for that, if you asked for it.’*

*‘Philippos might, yes. But I’ll not deny the lad this chance. We’ve discussed this before. Let him see something of the world, make something of himself. Besides, if we keep him back, people will talk behind their hands.’*

*‘Let them talk. He’s a boy. He has no business in anyone’s war. Philippos has soldiers enough.’*

*‘He’s fourteen, woman. And he’ll not be going to war, not until he’s trained. Philippos will see to that. The king doesn’t take green lads into battle, and in any case, he’s settled the Illyrians now. He signed a peace with Pleuratos only last year.’*

*‘And what of those Illyrian kings he has not signed a peace with? Or those of Thrace? Or Scythia? You think Philippos will run short of enemies to fight?’*

His father, Hephaistion recalled, had had no answer for that – or if he had, Hephaistion had not heard it. Not that it would have mattered. He was a noble son of Macedon, not a child to be kept tethered to his mother’s skirts; he would go to Pella; he would serve his king.

As they rounded a bend in the trail to see the hills fall away towards the sea, the city hove into view. Sun glinted white off the palace walls even at that distance, and silver off the far lagoon beneath. Between palace and lagoon lay the city itself, tawny and warm in the light of the westering sun. The sight had sent a hollow fluttering through Hephaistion’s middle that only grew stronger the closer they got.

It was the best part of a day’s journey from Amyntor’s lands to Pella. The two had set out before dawn, keeping a leisurely pace and stopping to rest in the midday heat. Now the evening summer sun was lowering as they neared the gates, massive wooden things, as thick as a man. On either side, a pair of men stood watch. Hephaistion’s gaze devoured them – the clean angle of their spears, the easy weight of the swords at their hips, the way they stood as statues despite

the beastly heat. The soldiers' eyes were sharp on the newcomers, measuring them as they went by, but nothing else about them moved. Philippos, who was a soldier himself, believed in discipline.

Pella, with its colour and clamour, was a far cry from his father's house in the hill country, which was modest enough for all the family's wealth. So had Pella been, Hephaistion's father told him, before Philippos' time. The Macedonian king, though, had spent years in Thebes of the shining walls where he had learned what power could look like, and if the wealth from his rule enabled him to build a city worthy of his achievements – and fit to house the Macedonian nobility – so much the better.

'Stop gawking, boy,' Amyntor hissed at his son as they rode through the lower city. Hephaistion blinked and straightened, schooling himself to look ahead. There was so much to catch the eye though: squads of men in full panoply drilling in the open yards, loping around the running track with their shields slung over their backs, dicing in the long shade of a wall. Pella was the capital of everything, including Philippos' army. War was a concept that Macedon knew.

They rode past rows of barracks, some so new the scent of firs still lingered. No king before Philippos had kept a standing army like this one. It had made him very much a power to be reckoned with, and made Macedon – until then a provincial backwater where, the wits remarked, any knave could be a king and any king a knave – the foremost strength in Hellas.

'Now remember, lad, I expect you to do well here.' Amyntor glanced sideways at his son, who was staring openly at a group of men digging holes and filling them in again, their hands filthy and their faces streaked with dust and sweat. 'Hsst! Pay attention, or it'll be you there soon enough!'

'Yes, Father.'

'You'll find the king has no time for laggards. You're not one, but once you get a name for it, it's difficult to shake. Assert yourself well, learn what's put to you and remember who you are.'

Hephaistion did not miss the emphasis in that. He nodded and shifted his weight. There was a lot to bear; he was his father's only son.

Beyond the soldiers' quarters and above the city with its wide marketplace and solemn temples and new theatre, the royal palace sat high-walled and grand. They would come to it too soon, at this rate. Hephaistion told himself the tightness in his chest was to do with being presented to the king, and hoped he would have time to wash. He had a fine new khiton in his baggage, and a silver brooch with a belt clasp to match, but right now he was tired and gritty and smelled of horse. The fact that his father was going to leave him here, where he would learn to be a man in all the ways that mattered, he drove to the back of his mind. Instead, he focused his attention on the activity in a nearby stable yard, where a handful of grooms was working with young horses. A small hard-looking man, whip thin, glanced over his shoulder at the two newcomers. A sudden grin split his sun-weathered face before he raised a hand, calling out.

‘Amyntor! Well met, well met!’

Dismounting, Amyntor smiled back as the other approached. ‘Leukos, you old fox. You’re looking well.’

‘Aye, and yourself,’ Leukos said, briefly clasping Amyntor’s hand. He looked up at Hephaistion, bright eyed. ‘Got some new stock for us, have you?’

Amyntor laughed. ‘My son, Hephaistion. I’ve come to present him to the king. He’s to take up service.’ There was pride in his voice, though his tone became sharp when he glanced at Hephaistion. ‘Get down and show some manners, boy! Had a proper tutor sent out for him from Athens. His mother insisted. Could have had him raised by wolves for all the good it did.’ That last to Leukos, who chuckled wryly at Amyntor’s words, rolling his eyes at the man’s nonsense.

Swinging smoothly down from his horse, showing no stiffness from the long ride, Hephaistion hesitated, unsure quite what was expected. He offered Leukos a polite salute. ‘Good health and greetings to you, sir,’ he said, in clear and unaccented Attik Greek. ‘I’m honoured to meet you.’

‘And you, young sir, though you can save your salute for the nobles. I’m head of the king’s stables, not captain of the guard.’

‘Nobility lies in a man’s spirit, not in his station,’ Hephaistion said carefully, with the air of a boy reciting a lesson he thought worth learning.

Leukos raised his brows at Amyntor. ‘Damn fine wolves.’

Some commotion at the stable yard suddenly grabbed their attention. One of the men – burly, with no great height and dark hair – was tossed to the ground by a squealing young stallion. The horse was soon brought back under control, where it stood trembling, rolling its eyes. The man who had fallen clambered to his feet and crossed to the horse, moving gently, and soothed the beast with a hand on its shoulder. Hephaistion approved; too many men thought breaking and beating the same when it came to horses. Leukos and his father were talking horses now too: How had the foaling been this year in Amyntor’s herds? Was he bringing in his yearlings for the autumn market?

‘I could even be looking for a new stallion, if you hear of anything promising. Nothing wrong with new blood,’ Amyntor commented. ‘And speaking of new blood, I’d best get on and speak with the king. I don’t want to be taking the boy all the way home again.’

Leukos smiled indulgently, knowing there was sorrow beneath the words, as well as a father’s pride. Boys grew up so fast. ‘Well, you’re in luck. The king’s been down seeing how we’re getting on with the schooling. I’ll fetch him.’

It seemed there was to be no time to bathe and change. Hephaistion turned nervously to his father, who gave his shoulder a single squeeze.

‘Settle, lad. No need to get skittery.’ Amyntor used the same tone that he would have used on a green horse. That, as much as the words themselves, calmed Hephaistion’s nerves.

Hephaistion drew a deep breath as Leukos spoke to a man in the yards, the man who had fallen before, who turned to look at him and his father. After saying something to the groom he strode toward them.

He wore only a plain tunic and sandals, and he was all over covered in dust from his tumble in the yards. A smear of dirt across his forehead showed where he had wiped at sweat with the back of his hand. He moved with a limp, and one eye was gone, opaque under the drooping lid with its puckered scar. The eye at least should have been a clue: he had lost that to an arrow off the walls of Methone after nearly a year of siege. He looked nothing like a king, but when he stopped before them and Amyntor greeted him by saying, 'Philippos, sire. May the gods ever favour you,' Hephaistion nearly disgraced himself by gawping. He caught himself just in time. All the same, the king glanced at him with an unmistakable twinkle, as if he knew exactly what the boy was thinking.

'Aye, it's good to see you too, you lazy dog. You've been taking your ease out in the back hills for too long. So, what have you brought me?' Philippos regarded Hephaistion openly now, as if sizing up a new pair of boots. 'You sure this is your boy, Amyntor? He's not nearly as ugly as you are.' Philippos didn't speak like a king any more than he looked like one – at least, not like the kings in the stories and histories Hephaistion's pedagogue had taught him. Hephaistion shouldn't have been surprised, perhaps; after all, Macedonian kings very rarely stood on ceremony. There was precious little time in between warring and working for any kind of ostentation, even if their subjects would have tolerated it – and Philippos had always been a man of the people.

Amyntor laughed. 'Philippos, you old scoundrel. Aye, the lad's mine. I might only have the one good arm, but even so I'll fight the man who says different. The gods did us the favour of having him take after his mother, is all. Cast him from finer clay. Apparently I've not displeased them enough that they'd inflict this face on anyone else.'

Gods. This was appalling. Feeling himself flush, Hephaistion shuffled awkwardly and told himself not to stare at his feet. He looked desperately to the yards instead, where a young man was now standing in royal livery, his face marked with bright fresh scars. The man – one of Philippos' guards, by the look of him – caught him staring and scowled. Hephaistion quickly turned his head away. Philippos, who had been watching him the whole time, smiled to himself before taking mercy.

'Well, lad, your father's vouched for you. I'd not have recognised you, myself. You've grown since last I saw you.'

'He was five then,' Amyntor answered dryly. 'Nine years will do that to a boy.'

'So they will.' Philippos raised an eyebrow at Hephaistion. 'So, you're fourteen now, eh? Ready for the world?'

Hephaistion swallowed. 'I don't know about the world, sir, but Pella's a start.' He was pleased at how steady his voice sounded.

Philippos chuckled. 'One step at a time, lad, that's the way. I wish my boy had half your sense. He wants things all at once, and never mind whether he's ready. He's thirteen, this summer. Young yet for his page service, but he wouldn't be held back.'

'The prince is a fine lad,' Amyntor said.

Philippos looked at him, his gaze suddenly flat. 'Is he?' he said, and there was something about the way he said it that made Hephaistion frown.

There was a stiff little pause, then Philippos laughed again. It sounded almost natural. He turned his attention back to Hephaistion. Amyntor's son was a comely enough lad, tall for his age with bronze hair and fine features that were starting to lose some of their boy's softness. He would be handsome once he had grown into them, Philippos thought. He might even be interested himself, in a few years. The boy met his gaze directly.

'It's Hephaistion, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir.'

Philippos grunted, pleased to see that the lad's manners were what they should be. Any freeman could call the king by name – titles did not hold to much – but there was such a thing as respect.

'Your father tells me you've taken your boar.'

'Yes, sir. Late spring.'

'A big brute, was he?'

Hephaistion considered a moment before answering, instinct telling him that the words he spoke now would count for more than just these few breaths. 'Not the biggest there ever was, sir, but big enough.'

Nodding, Philippos raised his brows. 'Were you scared?' he asked mildly.

The boy paused. A wild boar was a ferocious beast, quite capable of killing a man in the frenzy of the hunt. The beaters had driven the boar towards him, as he had waited armed with a man's spear and a boy's desperate courage, and when the creature had burst snorting from the bushes ... He looked up. Clear grey eyes met those of the king.

'Yes,' Hephaistion said steadily. 'I was.'

For a moment Philippos only looked at him in silence, and Hephaistion thought numbly that he had made a terrible mistake, that this man would brook no weakness, but then the king smiled.

'Shall I tell you something?' He leaned close, drawing Hephaistion in. 'When I took my boar, I was terrified.'

Slowly, Hephaistion felt a smile spread over his face. He couldn't help it. Philippos stepped back, clapping him on the shoulder with one heavy hand. 'You'd have been a fool not to have been afraid. That's what real courage is, boy. Holding the line. Standing fast while the enemy comes at you and you're ready to wet yourself. But Hephaistion, always remember, there's a time to lie. Sometimes a lie can be the best weapon you have, if enough people believe it. Do you understand?'

‘Yes, sir. A man can always bluff.’

‘And a diplomat too! Amyntor, you’ve raised a prodigy!’

Hephaistion’s father smiled. ‘I doubt that, sir, but he’s a good lad – and the only one I have, mind, so you’d best have a care with him.’ Amyntor was only partway joking; his eyes on the king were firm. ‘He’s had some training – knows his way around a horse and he can tell one end of a spear from another. I only hope he’ll make you an adequate page.’

The king dipped his head, acknowledging Amyntor’s half-spoken warning. ‘I shouldn’t worry. He’ll find his feet soon enough. The junior squadron are a rowdy bunch left to their own devices, but a little competition sorts the gold from the dross. No one shirks though you can be sure of that. His time off will be his own. The rest is duty, and if he’s as bright as he seems, this lad of yours, he’ll see to it smartly.’

The king may have been talking to Amyntor, but his words were for Hephaistion too. The boy did not miss it. He knew what he was being told.

‘Aye, he will,’ Amyntor said, giving his son a warning look that gave way to a smile as he clasped the back of the boy’s neck, warm and rough. ‘He’ll not disappoint.’

Philippos cocked his head and gave Amyntor a considering look. ‘I’d hope not. He comes of good stock. He’ll have to work for it though – the royal pages are trouble personified, given half the chance.’ He clapped Amyntor on the shoulder with a friendly grin. ‘Still, it’s a good training ground, and if the lad has your good sense – and your right cross! – he’ll survive. Come, make your farewells, and I’ll have a boy show Hephaistion to his new quarters.’

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Hephaistion felt like the new hound in a pack. There was a hierarchy among the pages, and his arrival sent the existing order into convulsions. Already he had been in three fights in the first week; he may have been one of the youngest boys in the pages’ barracks, but he had taken his boar, and there were affronts to his pride he would not take. He had a temper to match that pride too; it flared when he was pressed, and for all that he’d had no brothers to practise on, he could scrap like a stable cur when the need arose. The pages were beginning to learn that; after he had proven himself well enough in the ways that mattered, they made room for him in the ranks. Now, after two weeks, he was no longer a novelty and the other boys treated him like anyone else, which meant that the constant factions and bickering and jockeying for position included him too.

On this particular day the morning had not gone well. At sword drill, Hephaistion had been partnered with Kassandros, who was a year older than him, and the son of Antipatros, Philippos’ regent and secretary-general. He was also the boy Hephaistion liked least. On Hephaistion’s first night in the pages’ barracks, Kassandros, all seeming-friendly but for a wrongness in his eyes, had looked over the gear Hephaistion brought with him and smirked.

‘Well, I suppose this will do to start with, though wherever did you find that spear? That thing looks older than my father’s nurse. And it’s far too big for you; you’ll never manage it.’

Hephaistion had thought that was rich, coming from Kassandros. The older boy was shorter than him by half a head, and narrower in the shoulders, with a shock of red hair and pale, delicate-looking wrists. Tipping his head, Hephaistion had looked hard at the other lad, replying: ‘I managed it well enough on my boar hunt.’

That had made Kassandros’ eyes flicker, though he had covered it with a condescending expression. ‘Oh, did you really?’

Catching the edge of mockery, Hephaistion wondered if he was being called a liar. He had given Kassandros his best, brightest smile, and hefted the spear. It sat well in his hands. ‘Yes,’ he’d said. ‘I did. Really. Would you like me to show you? You can be the pig.’

Kassandros had stepped back quickly and glared at him, suddenly unwilling to see how far Hephaistion might take it. He liked to tease only when he was winning. There was something about him that made Hephaistion think of the mean-tempered old pony his father’s grooms had used to cart fodder – all bluster and sneak, it would bite a man only when he was not looking. Kassandros had gone for bluster too, sneering and saying, ‘Well, it was probably set up for you.’

That had made Hephaistion bristle, and he’d felt his shoulders stiffen. ‘Why, was yours?’

Someone nearby had sniggered at that, and another boy said, ‘Set up? He hasn’t even had his hunt yet. Rumour has it he’s waiting for next season’s piglets.’

Everyone had laughed at that, and Kassandros had stormed off in a black sulk. They had barely exchanged words since, but Hephaistion had noticed Kassandros’ eyes on him, with that wrong cool glitter. The other boy had earned himself a new nickname out of their encounter – half of the pages’ barracks was now calling him the Piglet Hunter or, more simply, Piglet. Kassandros hated it and made it plain he blamed Hephaistion. Hephaistion didn’t care. He only wished he’d thought of it himself. Then this morning at sword drill, Kassandros had not seemed to be able to make his feet and his hands work together at all, and Hephaistion had sent him sprawling in the dust. There had been no malice in it – it was hardly his fault if he was taller and stronger and Kassandros wasn’t paying attention. Near the end of the drill however Kassandros gave Hephaistion another reason to dislike him when, out of simple pique from being bested, he struck the younger boy from behind with his wooden practice sword as they stood waiting their turn. Now Kassandros had a broken nose, and Hephaistion had an aching head, a neatly stitched gash just behind his ear, and the afternoon at his disposal.

A day in Pella without parents or tutors to naysay him should have been a delight. The market square in the centre of the city was a great wide space, full of people and lined with stores and workshops in the shade of the wide porticos, along with stalls set out in the open to hawk anything from eggs to enamelled cloak-pins. Hephaistion, though, had no money to spend on fripperies – and besides, his head, throbbing from where Kassandros had hit him, felt half full of lead. However, the thronging market was a long way from the quiet hill country he

knew, loud and raucous and full of people jostling and shouting and watching him with narrowed eyes. It was overwhelming, and even a little intimidating. Hephaestion turned his back on it and fled.

Since childhood, Hephaestion had always gone to one particular place when seeking refuge from the world around him: the stables. Horses he knew. He had grown up with them, could not remember a time when he had not been as comfortable on horseback as he was on his own two feet. Here, the stables were always busy with one thing or another, but the grazing pastures were peaceful and welcoming for a boy who missed his home.

Hephaestion watched the horses for a while, the familiarity of it soothing both nerves and spirit. The bay on his left was high in the croup; the dun resting in the shade of a leaning old tree had well-sprung pasterns and a good slope of shoulder. He knew where he was, with horses; he noted lines and faults as automatically as he breathed.

A sudden drumming of hooves made the boy turn quickly, head up. The horses lifted their heads too, ears pricked in wary interest. Squinting against the sun's glare, Hephaestion saw a sturdy black horse – a stallion, by the thick neck and heavy shoulders – galloping hard across the pasture. Some fool of a stablehand had let it get loose wearing a headstall, the lead rope tied off and flapping against its neck. Frowning, he noticed the way the horse was moving, all tight and tense and coiled. Hephaestion, who had schooled enough horses to recognise the signs, knew plain outrage when he saw it. He had a moment to hear his father's reproving voice in his head – *that's what you get when you push a beast too far, lad* – and then the black horse was bearing down on him, and Hephaestion knew it was not going to stop.

Moving without thought, Hephaestion set himself squarely in the horse's path. If it cleared the fence, there would be nothing to stop it between here and the hill country, after which there was no telling where the animal might end up. This was too valuable a horse to take such a risk, no matter what idiot might own it.

'Steady now, whoa there, whoa' he called, dropping his voice low and slow. He made no move to get out of the way. Instead, he squared his shoulders and stood to his full height, hands raised and ready, and fixed the animal with his strongest stare. 'Stop, you big clod. Whoa.'

For the briefest moment, the horse checked its stride, and Hephaestion wondered if it was going to pull up after all. But then it gathered itself and leapt, and Hephaestion swore and leapt too, grabbing a handful of mane as the horse hit the ground and vaulting himself astride. The animal set its head to the lagoon. Hephaestion twisted his hands in the coarse black hair and clung like a burr.

It never occurred to him to be afraid. This was nothing he had not done before, working with his father and his father's grooms; playing 'who dares' with the grooms' sons. He was not in the habit of letting a horse get the better of him. In any case, there was no malice in the black horse that he could sense, and no true panic either, only a frustration that the animal was trying



to outrun. Hephaestion, with his headache and his homesickness, found that he could relate to that.

It was clear that the beast was accustomed to a rider; he made no effort to rid himself of the one he had so suddenly acquired. Rather, he collected himself and settled into his gait, flicking his ears back in acknowledgement. Taking hold of the lead rope about the horse's neck, Hephaestion boxed him in with hips and heels, setting his weight to slow the animal and turn him back for home. The horse obliged, dropping smoothly into an easy canter, arching his neck and snorting on every other stride.

'There now.' Hephaestion shifted again, nudging the horse into a circle with a squeeze here, a release there, a lift and shift of the rope. 'Daft beast. You see? You can do as you're told after all.' The black horse slowed further, settling to a controlled trot that was barely more than a fast walk. Hephaestion scratched the animal's neck in approval and smiled.

A high, clear whistle sounded from across the pasture. The black horse's head came up sharply; it danced a little, sidling on the spot. Growling, Hephaestion brought the rope in his hand lower, gathering the beast in. A boy was approaching across the field, young and blond out of breath, dressed in an old tunic that was covered in dust and frayed at the hem. Hephaestion glared at him. Some idiot stable lad, most likely. Probably the same fool who had worked this horse into a state and then let it loose. Hephaestion had no time for that. His father would have given him the sharp side of his tongue if he had done anything half so careless.

'Get over here, you idiot!'

The stable lad stopped where he was and blinked, as if surprised. Hephaestion had no time for that either.

'Well? Are you looking for this one?' He nodded to the horse under him, fidgeting where it stood. 'Or are you just wandering about trying to scare the horses?'

The stable lad blinked again, as if unsure how to respond. 'No. I mean, yes, I was looking for him. He ran off, you see -'

'I noticed. He was on his way to the gods know where when I stopped him.' And then, when the stable lad looked like saying something else stupid, 'Oh, make yourself useful, why don't you. Open the gate and I'll bring him through.'

The stable lad paused, looking hard at Hephaestion as if struggling to understand what he'd been told. His eyes were oddly light and very direct; for some reason, they took Hephaestion aback. There was a moment when nothing happened, and Hephaestion was about to tell the lad to get on with it - *open the gate, damn you* - when the boy seemed to gather himself, giving a quick nod and moving down the fence line to do as he'd been asked. Hephaestion kneed the stallion along beside him.

'I saw you catch him,' the stable lad ventured, pulling hard on the gate latch. It was stiff; the boy had to work it loose. He looked up at Hephaestion curiously, tossing his tumble of hair off his forehead; it fell all unruly like a lion's mane, glinting gold in the afternoon sun. 'Where did you learn to do that?'

‘What, ride?’ Hephaistion stroked the stallion’s thick, arched neck and looked down at the boy, who tipped his head to one side with half a smile.

‘No.’ The stable lad swung the gate open, moving back to give them space. ‘Mount like that, on the fly, without getting trampled. That was a neat trick.’

Hephaistion didn’t bother to answer. Heeling the horse through the gate, he slid off its back, unhitching the lead rope with a practiced flick. He held it out to the other boy, who took it and then stood there watching him with that direct, disconcerting gaze. Hephaistion wondered if he was simple. Or maybe he had been hit over the head too.

‘Well then. There.’ Turning to stroke the horse’s neck, Hephaistion spoke over his shoulder. ‘Think you can manage to get him back to the stables without losing him again?’ That was sharp, but he wasn’t sorry. This was too fine an animal to be casual with its care, and in any case, he doubted that Philippos’ master of horse would be any more lenient than Amyntor when it came to careless stable lads. This particular one gave him another of those odd looks, as if unsure of what he’d heard.

‘Yes.’ Shortening the lead rope, he nodded, very slightly. ‘I think I can manage that.’

‘And next time, keep hold of the rope or shut the yard gates.’ Hephaistion could feel the ache in his head sinking into the back of his skull. He thought he might want to lie down, somewhere dark and quiet. Moving away, he gave the other boy a last piece of advice. ‘The king doesn’t put up with fools, so try not to be completely an idiot with his horses.’

He didn’t see the expression on the boy’s face, or the way he watched him walk away.